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ABSTRACT

Students at Westchester Community College (WCC) are a diverse and often disenfranchised group. To help these students find their own voices, lyric poems are read now and then in a freshman writing course. Initially, lyric poems are read and discussed during the first week of class. Without the fear of reading something incomprehensible, students approach the texts willingly. Lyric poems also succeed as welcome "brief" texts sprinkled here and there throughout the semester. Seamus Heaney's poem "Digging" has served as a bridge between thematic units on family and on education. Because many of the students at WCC are the first in their families to attend college, they hear and appreciate the admiration in Heaney's voice as he speaks of his elders. However, expressive discourse can be risky. A highly charged discussion followed when a student recited the lyrics to Eric Clapton's song "Tears in Heaven." Lyrics succeed in the composition class because students and teachers respond to the voice of loss or grief or celebration. (Five lyric poems are attached.) (RS)

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Elizabeth Gaffney

POETRY IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

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Elizabeth Gaffney

POETRY IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

The fact that I write poems influences how I read and teach them. Poetry writing reinforces my desire that students at the two-year college find their voices. Personal voices belong in the writing classroom. As I prepared this presentation, I discovered (in the March COLLEGE ENGLISH) Gary Tate's argument for reading imaginative literature in the freshman composition course. (We have been discussing this in my own department as we revised our standard syllabus for Comp Lit 1 and 2.) Tate laments the "minimal" presence of imaginative literature in writing classes, urging us to rethink our desire for students to "succeed as writers in the academy" and questioning the assumed goals of the epistemic writing course (317-321).

My goal as a writing teacher has always been to help students find their own voices, and lyric poems, read now and then in a writing course, can help accomplish this goal in several ways. Like Tate, I am "far more interested in my students as individual human beings" than in preparing them for the academic discourse of business management or biology (321). My three years' teaching experience at a large, public suburban community college strengthens this belief in the importance of personal voice in writing. My students are a diverse and often disenfranchised group. They need to be drawn in to the classroom; they need to see the connections between reading and writing and their own lives. Many have been alienated from classrooms and student culture for years. Others are working class and

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minorities for whom the community college offers their only opportunity for higher education. These students respond to lyric poems.

I use the lyric poem neither as a rhetorical model nor as a text to be deciphered. For me lyric is not a finished object but fluid and raw; it is intimate, insistent. It exploits language and it takes a strong point of view. Lyric poems not only make us aware of compressed syntax and word sounds--they take risks with expression.

How can we integrate lyric poems into the freshman writing course syllabus? My colleagues at WCC and I have accomplished this in several ways. Initially, we read one or two poems during that first week of classes every semester, before class enrollments stabilize. Poems are short, perfect to read and discuss in a fifty-minute session. This seems obvious, and some of my senior colleagues have been doing it for years. Many of our students are not aware that these short texts are POEMS, and I make no big deal about poetry. Without the fear of reading something incomprehensible (which students often have about poetry and Shakespeare), they approach the texts willingly. Lyric poems capture their interest, evoke responses, surprise them. The personal voice in an effective lyric alerts students to something important, emotional, challenging, even dangerous. I want to challenge their expectations and preconceived notions of what happens in a classroom, and no better time to do this than in the first week of classes! So reading a lyric poem with my

students and discussing it in collaborative groups in the first week will help to accomplish this goal.

For example, we read Seamus Heaney's "Mid-Term Break" or Robert Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays" during the first week of Comp Lit 1. Both are lyrics of loss, grief, guilt. Heaney's poem is written from the point of view of the oldest boy, away at school, who returns home for the funeral of his youngest brother. Students respond to the irony of the title (some "break" the speaker has from school!). They hear pain in the speaker's voice. The monosyllabic compressed syntax of the last line--"a four foot box, a foot for every year"--stuns them. The intimate physical details of the wake evoke memories of their own experiences with death in the family. When we read Robert Hayden's poem, students respond to the regret they hear in the speaker's voice as he repeats: "What did I know, what did I know..." about his father's "lonely" responsibilities. In groups and in written responses, students express their own guilt at taking a parent's love for granted. Both poems elicit careful attention to language, which is a good way to begin a writing course, looking closely at words and how they move us.

But wait--this is freshman composition, not group therapy! My colleagues and I do find ourselves experiencing risky moments in the classroom, "teachable moments," too, when groups report on their own experiences that the poem evokes. The personal voice of the poem encourages students to speak. Lyric poems break through conventional

notions of classroom discourse. They make fine ice-breakers for the first week of a new term.

Lyric poems also succeed as welcome "brief" texts sprinkled here and there throughout the semester. Students welcome the brevity of what they consider a "short, easy" reading assignment, particularly after working through difficult long essays. This year, I have participated in a teaching cluster for English 101 and 102, our required composition and introduction to literature sequence. Five faculty in my department met regularly and devised a common syllabus to put into practice our ideas of linking English 101 and 102, using imaginative literature throughout the sequence rather than only in the second semester, emphasizing writing, reading, critical thinking and the skills of summary, response, paraphrase, analysis, evaluation, and so on. Our cluster designed a collaborative syllabus, reviewed texts and chose a reader and two thematic units in common ("family" and "education") for the composition course.

One of my contributions to this collective syllabus was Heaney's poem "Digging," which was a bridge between family and education. I wrote a writing assignment based on Heaney's poem, in which he announces his desire to "dig" with his pen in the same way that his father and grandfather have dug with their spades. In commenting on his poem, Heaney remembers old men calling out to him as he walked to school in Derry: "Stay in school, boy. The pen's easier handled than the spade." In the essay assignment, we asked students: "Is the pen easier handled than the manual labor that does not require a college degree? Why are you attending college? Are you the first in your

family to do so?" and so on. I find that two-year college students in particular love the voice of celebration that they hear in Heaney's poem. Heaney does not reject the physical labor of his father and grandfather; he boasts about it: "By God, the old man could handle a spade./ Just like his old man." He respects his elders but chooses a different vocation, yet he wishes to emulate their diligence and skill. Because many of my students are the first in their families to attend college, they hear and appreciate the admiration in Heaney's voice as he speaks of his elders. The essays that students write in response to this poem resonate with open-ended questions and connect their lives and personal choices to their family history and to Heaney's choices. I gave my students an essay prompt which read: "Like Seamus Heaney, I..."

Expressive discourse can be risky. The resulting emotional raw edge in a classroom, when we bring in lyric poems like these, is a challenge, sometimes a danger. Where, for example, does heightened sensitivity to language verge on exploiting students' own feelings? I choose to take the risks even though it leaves me feeling vulnerable.

For example, as an ice-breaker activity, I sometimes ask writing students to bring in their favorite song lyrics and read them to the group. Last spring, a highly charged discussion followed when a student recited the lyrics to Eric Clapton's "Tears in Heaven" (the song that won him attention and a recent Grammy). The simplicity of the speaker's question, which he repeats, ("Would you know my name...?") moved students. The context of the song was as compelling

for my class as the lyrics--the fact that Clapton wrote this in the second person, addressed to his dead son, and as a way to work out his grief at the boy's tragic death. Students understood instinctively why this writer wrote the song.

This concept of what moves writers to write songs extends easily to poems. After all, "lyric" means "song," and songs are part of each student's culture. I sometimes use "Poem for the Broken Cup" in writing classes. The author calls this lament about infertility a "raw" poem. Its undisguised voice of loss evokes emotion in listeners. One student responded that it was good that the speaker broke the cup--now she can get on with her life and forget the past. After reading "35/10," Sharon Olds' complaint of a mother who observes her growing daughter's beauty and her own aging, another student responded, "Mothers aren't supposed to feel jealous of their daughters!" In both cases, the poems take risks with expression.

Lyrics succeed in the composition class because we respond to the voice of loss or grief or celebration. That voice enriches the tonal, intellectual and emotional range of students' own discourses. We don't simply "appreciate" the poem; we appropriate it. In the words of Nancy Sommers, poems demonstrate "what writers know: how to bring their life and their writing together" (CCC February 1992).

Elizabeth Gaffney
Westchester Community College
March 1993

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35/10
by Sharon Olds

Brushing out my daughter's dark
silken hair before the mirror
I see the grey gleaming on my head,
the silver-haired servant behind her. Why is it
just as we begin to go
they begin to arrive, the fold in my neck
clarifying as the fine bones of her
hips sharpen? As my skin shows
its dry pitting, she opens like a small
pale flower on the tip of a cactus;
as my last chances to bear a child
are falling through my body, the duds among them,
her full purse of eggs, round and
firm as hard-boiled yolks, is about
to snap its clasp. I brush her tangled
fragrant hair at bedtime. It's an old
story--the oldest we have on our planet--
the story of replacement.

Those Winter Sundays
by Robert Hayden

Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

Poem for the Broken Cup
for David and Anne

The way I winced as my elbow hit it,
then even before it hit the floor
the frenzy of weeping, astonishing

the children, who stared in stunned
silence for fully five seconds before
the baby wailed in fear and David

joined in sympathy while I dried my
eyes and tried to explain to him, to
ease the terror my tears had caused:

not the cup, I said, though the cup
was lovely, white mellowed these nine
years to cream, with its Potter

pictures of Peter Rabbit, and the
sweet frieze of green leaves on the
handle: not the cup, but it was

yours, I bought it for you four years
before you were born, just at the very
beginning, just when we were starting

to recognize that getting you was going
to take more work than simply making
love: and all those barren years

in Queens, I used to drink my morning
coffee from that cup as though that cup
were magic, as though it could change

things--and I started to cry again,
closing my eyes against his frightened
uncomprehending face: the scalding

realization that even though I have them
now, those two, the scars of those years
are still with me and always will be:

and standing in spilled milk and shards
of china, crying and not even trying to stop,
scaring my children, I cried My cup! The cup!

Kate Jennings

Mid-Term Break

I sat all morning in the college sick bay
Counting bells knelling classes to a close.
At two o'clock our neighbours drove me home.

In the porch I met my father crying--
He had always taken funerals in his stride--
And Big Jim Evans saying it was a hard blow.

The baby cooed and laughed and rocked the pram
When I came in, and I was embarrassed
By old men standing up to shake my hand

And tell me they were 'sorry for my trouble',
Whispers informed strangers I was the eldest,
Away at school, as my mother held my hand

In hers and coughed out angry tearless sighs.
At ten o'clock the ambulance arrived
With the corpse, stanched and bandaged by the nurses.

Next morning I went up into the room. Snowdrops
And candles soothed the bedside; I saw him
For the first time in six weeks. Paler now,

Wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple,
He lay in the four foot box as in his cot.
No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.

A four foot box, a foot for every year.
--Seamus Heaney

DIGGING

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
To scatter new potatoes that we picked
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.
Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner's bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away

Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
Over his shoulder, going down and down
For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.

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